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Are They Merely “Prescriptive”?

Multiple Negation and the 18th-century Grammars¹

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1. Introduction

Multiple negations are expressions such as “I can’t go nowhere”, “she didn’t have no break nor no meal” instead of saying “I can’t go anywhere”, “she didn’t have any break or any meal”. In the former sentences, multiple negative elements do not cancel out each other, but instead emphasize the negative effect. Such way of using negation is easily found in Old and Middle English, but in Present-day English, it is regarded as one of the most disliked usage of negation (Crystal 2003: 194).

The purpose of this paper is to reevaluate the “prescriptive” grammars of the 18th century which are often regarded as the oppressors of multiple negation. I will examine the grammarians’ statements on multiple negation from four points of view, and use this to give some insights into their attitudes towards the English language and usage that we cannot merely call prescription or proscription.

2. Preceding studies

As I stated above, 18th-century grammar and multiple negation are often regarded respectively as the

¹ This is the revised version of the paper read at the 17th General Meeting of the Japanese Association for Studies in the History of the English Language, October 13, 2007.

prescriptive oppressor of language and one of the most typical examples of its victims (Jespersen 1917: 65-6; Leonard 1930: 92-3; Baugh 2002: 279). For example, Baugh (2002) says in the section of “The Beginning of Prescriptive Grammar” (278) that “the eighteenth century is responsible for the condemnation of the double negative. [. . .] Thus a useful idiom was banished from polite speech” (279). Tieken-Boon (1982) proves that grammarians’ statements do not reflect the contemporary use of multiple negation and cast some doubt on their reliability as having accurate knowledge of its actual usage. The bad reputation for their prescriptive nature is still persistent even now; Wolf (2007) quotes several famous grammarians’ statements when he insists that the “seventeenth- and eighteenth-century grammars do not describe nor give alternatives from which to chose [sic]” (3).

On the contrary, few remarks can be found on the “not prescriptive” attitude of 18th-century grammarians regarding multiple negation. Although some scholars such as Leonard (1930) and Tieken-Boon (1982) afford insights into the descriptivism of 18th-century grammar on this topic, it is not their main focus. Leitner (1986) treats multiple negation as an example to show the development of new grammatical trend to insist “on actual usage (even if it is past usage)” (416) and to adopt “a purely descriptive stance” (417), but he considers that it started from the middle of the 19th century.

In contrast, the present study will focus specifically on the “not prescriptive” aspects and multiplicity of the 18th-century grammarians’ view towards multiple

negation.

3. Terms and scope of research

As stated at the outset, “multiple negation” means the negative expressions which consist of several negative elements, and in this paper it is distinguished from the logically affirmative expressions which consist of two negative canceling each other.

As for the scope of this research, I have chosen those grammars which were already referred to in prior studies done by Leonard (1930), Tieken-Boon (1982), and Austin (1884), and have added some texts which are not treated by them.² Consequently, I consulted 44 texts in total, which make up about one-fourth of all 18th-century grammar.³

Besides the multiple negation consisting of *not*, *no*, *none*, *never*, *nothing*, I will deal with the conjunctive negation consisting of *nor* and other negative elements such as *neither-nor* and *nor-nor*, for they are vital to this paper in that they show the various viewpoints of grammarians.

² Although Tieken-Boon (1982) includes Maittaire (1712) into “the works that do not discuss double negation” (284-5), I found it informative for my research.

³ The 44 texts consist of 39 texts surveyed by preceding studies and 5 texts not studied by them. 5 texts are following: Lowe (1737), Priestley (1769), Devis (1777), Brittain (1788), *A Short English Grammar* (1794). According to Alston (1965), a total of 237 grammar texts in separate titles were published in the 18th century.

4. Discussion

4.1. Possible reevaluation of grammarians' statements

In my corpus, the following 20 grammarians refer to the issue of multiple negation:

Maittaire(1712)	Duncan(1731)	Kirkby(1746)
Martin(1748)	Fisher(1750)	Gough(1754)
Buchanan(1762)	Lowth(1762)	Burn(1766)
Priestley(1769)	Baker(1770)	Fenning(1771)
Clarke(1772)	Campbell(1776)	Mennye(1785)
Ussher(1785)	Coote(1788)	Withers(1789)
Murray(1795)	Mackintosh(1797)	

Prior to the examining the above grammarians' statements from four points of view, let us take a particular look at several grammarians who have often been regarded as prescriptive but seem to need more careful consideration.

Greenwood is regarded as the first grammarian who began "the battle on the double negation" (Leonard 1930: 92). Nevertheless, his description is nothing but a brief note of the logical principle, the axiom which had already been recognized in Renaissance⁴: "N.B. Two Negatives, or two Adverbs of Denying do in English affirm" (160). It seems unwise to regard this simple statement as the proscription of multiple negation, since there is no critical

⁴ I used *Early English Books Online* (EEBO) as a reference and it shows that this rule first appears in the translation of Mornay's French religious writings (1587: 398).

comment or opinion on the usage.⁵

Furthermore, Tieken-Boon (1982: 279) refers to Martin as the first grammarian that gives “explicit information on the eighteenth-century theory behind the disapproval of double negation”. Her statement is correct in that he is representative of grammarians who apply the logical rule directly to languages, but it does not mean that he is representative of “prescriptive” grammarians. On the contrary, he minutely observes the current usage and does not use any normative words to criticize or prohibit it. As may be expected of a mathematician, Martin explains the English negative system mathematically:

- (1) Am I Christ, no, no; [. . .]; and in this case the two negatives answer to the addition of two negative quantities in Algebra, the sum of which is negative. (Martin 93)

His explanation is reasonable and convincing, bearing no note of prescription. From the above observations, it can therefore be said that some

⁵ McIntosh (1986) also evaluates English grammars before 1751 as “relatively innocent of prescriptivism” (49), observing in them the shortness which “makes no pretensions beyond the essentials” (48) and informative rather than prescriptive nature (48-9). Besides Greenwood, following four grammarians refer only to the “two-negatives-make-an-affirmative” rule: Jones (1724), Devis (1777), Webster (1784), *A Short English Grammar* (1794). However, I have to add that such statements as “two negatives should never be used, because they make an affirmative” (Clarke 128) and “Two negatives may make an affirmative, but cannot express a denial” (Mennye 18) is counted as strong opposition against multiple negation.

grammarians show aspects which cannot be concluded simply as “prescriptive”. Then, in the following section let us look closely at many noteworthy statements which show various points of view towards multiple negation.

4.2. Four types of description

4.2.1. Historical viewpoint

I propose that descriptive explanations about multiple negation fall into four categories. The first is the historical observation, in which multiple negation is exemplified with the earlier usages taken from Old and/or Middle English.

- (2) We use but one negative, though the Saxons used two, as, [. . .] And hence Chaucer, [. . .]. (Martin 93)
- (3) In some cases, two negative particles were formerly used, as in Greek, where we now use only one. And this sterre, which is toward the northe, that we clippen the lode sterre, ne appeareth not to hem. Maundeville. (Priestley 101)
- (4) In modern Saxon also—I mean the Saxon Version of the Bible—I have seen FOUR Negatives! (Withers 405)

In Martin’s and Withers’ statements, “Saxons” means the Anglo-Saxon language.

Lowth quotes examples from Shakespeare as well as

Chaucer:

- (5) “Give not me counsel; *Nor* let *no* comforter delight mine ear.” Shakespeare, *Much ado*. [. . .]
Shakespeare uses this construction frequently. It is a relic of the antique style, abounding with Negatives, which is now grown wholly obsolete. (Lowth 99)

Similarly to Lowth, Coote explains multiple negation using examples taken from “[o]ur earlier writers” (342) in the early Modern English period such as Shakespeare and Ben Jonson.

Although unbiased historical analysis is comparatively few, it can at least be said that some grammarians have a diachronic perspective toward English language in the 18th century.

4.2.2. Cross-linguistic viewpoint

Some grammarians have found this negative system in languages besides English. Referring to Greek, Priestley and Withers state:

- (6) In some cases, two negative particles were formerly used, as in Greek, where we now use only one. (Priestley 101)
- (7) DOUBLE Negatives [. . .] That is used in Greek, I know and lament. (Withers 405)

Martin and Campbell were also able to find uses of multiple negation in French.

- (8) 378. But the two negatives as used by the Saxons and French must be understood by way of apposition, as if the above sentence were worded thus, *Am I Christ, no, no*; (Martin 93)
- (9) The two negatives of the Greek are precisely on the same footing with the two negatives of the French; our single particle *not* is a full equivalent to both. [. . .] *Ne pas or non point*. Sometimes the French use even three negatives where we can properly employ but one in English, as in this sentence: “Je *ne nie pas* que je *ne l’* aie dit.” “I do *not* deny that I said it.” (Campbell 348)

It is said that the scientific studies of the historical or comparative linguistics did not start until the 19th century (Leonard 1929: 135; Aarsleff 1983; Görlach 2003: 118). Indeed, we can infer that the study of these fields was not fully developed in the 18th century from the above statements, where only educated or classical languages such as French or Greek are exemplified. However, the insights into historical or comparative linguistics as seen in Martin and Campbell, show objective and descriptive attitudes which may safely be called a sign of the scientific study of English in the following centuries.

4.2.3. Observation of the emphasizing effect

The emphatic power of multiple negation is first recognized in Greek in the middle of the 17th century,⁶ when the translation and interpretation of religious writings are flourishing.

In the 18th century, grammarians begin to observe the same emphatic effect in English negation as seen in the authoritative languages. The earliest one is Maittaire:

- (10) The Adverb *no* is only used, when alone without any other word, as when it answers a question, or the negative is emphatically repeated; e.g. *shall i do this? no: not if i might gain the world. We gave them place no not for an hour.* (Maittaire 108)

Maittaire is a scholar of classical languages (Lelievre 1956), so it seems reasonable to suppose that he adopts the traditional account of emphatic power of multiple negation.

It is known that the majority of the 18th-century grammarians' primary focus was on multiple negation consisting of the correlative conjunction *nor* and other negative (Brown 1884: 662; Leonard 1930: 92-3; Austin 1984: 140). For the present, let us look at the statements relating to this kind of multiple negation more closely, for many such grammarians recognize the emphatic effect of multiple negation.⁷

⁶ As far as I surveyed EEBO, Gouge (1655: 58) is the first that mentions "[t]he emphasis of doubling and trebling negative particle in Grece".

⁷ This might be partly due to the influence of Johnson's dictionary

Priestley goes so far as to recommend multiple negation *not-nor* rather than *not-or*:

- (11) Sometimes the particle *or*, and *nor*, may, either of them, be used with nearly equal propriety. *The king, whose character was not sufficiently vigorous, nor decisive, assented to the measure.* Hume's History, vol. 6. P. 102. *Or* would perhaps have been better, but *nor* seems to repeat the negation in the former part of the sentence, and therefore gives more emphasis to the expression. (Priestley 102)

This statement is almost directly adopted by Murray (200).

Brittain advocates the emphatic effect of *neither-nor*, saying that *neither-or* is "insufficient".

- (12) But the correlative and disjunctive negatives; as *neither, nor*, always form two separate negations; and may emphatically follow another negative; [. . .] *Nay*, the conjunction *nor*, so naturally succeeds *neither*, that *or* seems often less proper, or insufficient to supply its place; as, "Neither capable of pleasing the understanding, or (nor) imagination." Addⁿ.⁸ (Brittain 79)

(1755), which describes *neither* in *neg-neither* by saying it is used "often, though not very grammatically, but emphatically, after another negative" ("Neither", def. 3). McIntosh (1986: 65) suggests that Johnson "hedges over the grammaticalness of the construction" of multiple negation, because "he took high Elizabethan English as a standard for excellence and correctness in the Dictionary". Literature of the Elizabethan period retains many use of multiple negation (Barber 2000: 198-9; Rissanen 2002: 272).

⁸ The abbreviation of "Addison".

On the contrary, Baker at first proscribes to use *neither* and *nor* together with *not* and *no*, but adds the following tolerant comment later:

- (13) In very animated Speeches, where a Man were delivering himself with Vehemence and Heat, *neither* and *nor*, as having a more forcible Sound than *either* and *or*, might perhaps be used not with an ill Grace. (Baker 112)

Even Withers, one of the most “prescriptive” grammarians, observes the vehement tone of multiple negation:

- (14) Even if Mr. Addison ⁹ had written —NOT—his Lordship’s Correction is admissible only on the Plea of adding Vehemence to the Negation. In strict Propriety, a Sentence thus constructed involves a Solecism. (Withers 419-20)

He opposes the combination of *neither-nor* and of *not-nor*, but admits their emphasizing effect as other grammarians do:

- (15) [. . .] And that—NOR—preceded by—NEITHER—with the Bishop of London’s Arrangement is inaccurate and inelegant; and if

⁹ Withers opposes *neither-or* in Addison’s passage that “This is another Use of Medals, that, in my Opinion, is NEITHER capable of pleasing the Understanding, OR the Imagination” (412), saying that it should be corrected into *neither-nor* (414).

preceded by—NOT—it involves a Solecism, pardonable on the Plea of affording an imaginary Strength to the Negation. (Withers 420)

4.2.4. Literary effect in *nor-nor*

Lastly, in order to prove the generous attitude toward multiple negative constructions, I will add that many grammarians recognize the variety of possible combinations other than *neither-nor*.¹⁰ Among the variants, *nor-nor* is the most recognized as a common literary expression.

(16) 7. [. . .] And with the Poets *or*, *nor* are frequently substituted for *either*, *neither*, in Imitation of the Latin. [. . .]and for *Neither* high *nor* low; they say, *Nor* high *nor* low. (Kirkby 113)

(17) 31. Among the poets, *nor* is often used instead of *neither*, so that *nor* answers to *nor*, just as it does to *neither*, in prose: thou hast *nor* youth, *nor* age:[. . .].(Fell 145)

(18) *Nor* is often in Poetry used in the first Member of a Sentence for neither; as, I *nor* love myself *nor* thee. (Buchanan 288-289)

¹⁰ I found that 10 grammarians acknowledge the following three types of combination: 1) *neg-nor* (Collyer, Kirkby, Buchanan, Burn, Fell, Ussher, Shaw, Mackintosh) 2) *nor-nor* (Kirkby, Lowth, Buchanan, Webster, Fell, Ussher, Shaw) 3) *neither-neither* (Webster). As for the historical variants of conjunctive negation other than *neither-nor*, see Mazzon (2004: 71).

- (19) In poetry it is not uncommon to substitute *nor* for *neither*, and *or* for *either*; as, “*Nor* Simois, choak’d with men, and arms, and blood, *Nor* rapid Xanthus’ celebrated flood, Shall longer be the poet’s highest themes.” ADDISON.(Coote 244)

Despite the declining tendency to use multiple negation in Middle English, conjunctive negation consisting of *nor* is said to have been frequently used (Visser 1963-73, I: § 113; Iyeiri 2001: 138-42). The frequent occurrences of *nor-nor* by the literary authorities of the preceding centuries, may have encouraged grammarians to praise its poetic taste instead of criticizing the irregularity and archaism found in this type of multiple negation. According to Percy (1997), 18th-century grammarians represented by Lowth acknowledge “a distinct poetic register of English [. . .] exempt from some of the rules imposed on formal prose” (129). We can regard *nor-nor* as one of such cases that is exempted from grammatical rules of prose because of their poetic value.

5. Conclusion

Observing the 18th-century grammars from four descriptive points of view, we can see that it is undeniable that various perspectives can be found regarding the topic of multiple negation which has often been regarded as the target of prescriptivism. Especially where multiple negation using conjunctive *nor* is concerned, the diversity and generosity in attitude are conspicuous. This may symbolize the fact that multiple negation was an unsettled

matter among grammarians both in regard to its definition and the degree to which they tolerated it. In light of such variety of descriptions and interactions both between prescriptivism and descriptivism, and among grammarians, it would be safe to say that there is scope for further research on the “not merely prescriptive” aspects of 18th-century grammar in regard to multiple negation.

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